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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: UPDATE ON EXPLOSIONS NEAR BUKHARA

REF: TASHKENT 794

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (SBU) Summary: As the day progresses, more reports have come in from Embassy contacts and local and international news sources regarding the series of explosions which occurred during the morning of July 10 in the town of Kagan, approximately 15 kilometers from Bukhara (reftel). All reports indicate that the explosions were caused by an accident, possibly a fire ignited by an electrical short, at an army munitions depot in Kagan. There are no reports that the explosions were caused by a terrorist or criminal attack. Uzbek government sources have so far reported that at least three individuals were killed and 21 injured, but other reports suggest that the number could climb higher. The Ambassador shared his condolences with the Deputy Foreign Minister and offered to seek emergency and medical assistance. An international NGO (and U.S. grant recipient) was set to hold its annual international conference in Bukhara next week, and approximately 20-25 AmCit conference participants were already in Bukhara when the explosions occurred. The conference was cancelled and arrangements have been made to evacuate the AmCits from Bukhara to Samarkand and Tashkent.

12. (SBU) With the relative lack of concrete information being reported by the official media, the rumor mill has begun in full force in Bukhara, and some contacts have reported hearing rumors that as many as 5,000 people have been killed and that the government is planning to evacuate the city of Bukhara as well. We are not yet able to confirm or deny these rumors, but we suspect they are exaggerated, though we also believe that the number of casualties and the extent of the damage in Kagan are greater than what the government has reported. We will continue to follow the situation closely and provide updates as needed. The Embassy's Emergency Action Committee was convened and appropriate steps have been taken. End summary.

UPDATED INFORMATION ON EXPLOSIONS

¶3. (C) Poloff spoke again with Bukhara-based human rights activist Shukhrat Ganiev, who clarified his earlier report on the location of the helicopter base and army depot. He explained that the depot where the explosions occurred was inside Kagan, on a street called "Karoleyva," not in a district outside of Kagan. Ganiev reported that all internet and landline phone connections had been cut in Bukhara, and he was only able to communicate with poloff using his daughter's cell phone, which has a Tashkent telephone number (Note: Other Emboffs were able to reach Bukhara residents, but it is unclear whether they were calling Bukhara or Tashkent numbers. End note.) He reported that local television and radio had announced an evacuation of Kagan and a district of Bukhara which bordered Kagan. Those evacuated were asked to head to regions north and east of Bukhara. The broadcast also called for people to remain calm and not panic. He reported that many residents of Bukhara were still indoors and feared further explosions. Ganiev estimated that Kagan has about 45,000 residents.

¶4. (C) The Embassy's Office of Military Cooperation called the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES), which reported that it had dispatched a team to the site of the explosions, but had not heard back yet from the team. The MES confirmed that residents were being evacuated from Kagan, but not from Bukhara. The MES promised to call the Embassy with more information once it heard back from the team.

¶5. (C) The brother of one of the Embassy's local guards, who is a neighborhood police commander in Kagan, reported that the officials from the Ministries of Interior, Defense, and Emergency Situations are in Kagan but cannot get inside the depot yet, as shells are still exploding one at a time. He further reported that firefighters will not be allowed into the depot until the explosions completely cease.

¶6. (C) The Embassy's Travel Office was informed that all trains to Bukhara were cancelled (Note: Bukhara's main train station is located in Kagan. End note.) Train passengers heading to Bukhara were being advised that they could travel by train as far as the town of Qizil Tepe, approximately 50 kilometers from Bukhara, and then travel the rest of the way by car or bus. The Travel Office reported that flights to Bukhara have continued as normal.

LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE

¶7. (U) Quoting the state-controlled Uza news agency, Reuters reported that a series of explosions at a helicopter base in Kagan, which was used by Soviet forces during the Afghan war in the 1980s, killed at least 3 people and wounded 21. Reuters further reported that the explosions smashed windows in buildings in Bukhara, several miles away from the depot. A resident of Bukhara reported to Reuters that "witnesses say there are many casualties...hospitals are full, many are being sent to regional hospitals."

¶8. (U) Uza, citing the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES), stated that "all those injured are being given necessary medical assistance" and that the Defense Ministry had cordoned off the area around the depot. MES was also cited by the Russian RIA news agency as denying that there was large-scale damage to Kagan's infrastructure, including to its local hospital or railway station.

¶9. (U) According to the independent Ferghana.ru website, representatives of the Uzbek Defense Ministry (MOD) officially confirmed the explosions in Kagan. The MOD also confirmed that there were casualties, but did not specify numbers. Ferghana.ru further reported that a helicopter unit in Kagan caught fire at around 11 p.m. on July 9, and that soldiers had tried to put out the blaze, but could not prevent it reaching artillery shells, which began to explode.

VIDEO AND PICTURES ON INDEPENDENT WEBSITE

¶10. (U) The independent Ferghana.ru website included a video fragment apparently captured by an observer in Kagan on his cell phone. The video shows the sky and buildings on the horizon briefly illuminated in the afterglow of the explosion, and several seconds later a loud popping sound can be heard. The video is approximately one-minute long. Ferghana.ru also posted photos of Kagan residents being evacuated, while RIA posted on its website a photo of the burned-out husk of a building surrounded by fire engines and blue vehicles.

GROUP OF AMCITS PLANNED TO ATTEND CONFERENCE IN BUKHARA

¶11. (SBU) The International Education and Resource Network (iEARN), a Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) grant recipient, planned to hold its annual international conference and youth summit (www.iearn2008.uz) in Bukhara from July 12 - 18. The AmCit organizer of the conference, who is already in Bukhara, has been in continual contact with the Embassy. He reported hearing from "security forces" that the fires from the explosions were still not under control and could reach some sort of chemical storage facility later this evening. He said that 60 foreigners were already in Bukhara for the conference, including approximately 20 - 25 AmCits. Ironically, some of the AmCits were set to make a presentation at the conference on natural disaster preparedness.

¶12. (SBU) The Public Affairs Officer suggested that the AmCit conference organizer err on the side of caution and cancel the conference, which he later did. The conference organizer reported that arrangements had been made to evacuate the AmCit conference participants by bus and to house them at hotels in Samarkand and Tashkent.

¶13. (C) A Public Affairs exchange program alumnus and iEARN coordinator in Bukhara reported that almost the entire town of Kagan was being evacuated and that many houses were damaged and people were injured. He reported that injured and evacuated individuals were being housed at other dormitories across Bukhara, including approximately 2,000 individuals at one college dormitory which normally holds only 150. He also heard rumors of individuals in Bukhara being evacuated.

¶14. (C) The conference organizer also reported that conference participants from Qatar arrived at the Tashkent International Airport on the morning of July 10 and were refused entry by Uzbek immigration officials as soon as they announced they were headed to Bukhara. They were forced to get back on their plane and fly back to Qatar. We have so far not heard of other foreign nationals being refused entry into Uzbekistan.

CONSULAR ISSUES WARDEN MESSAGE

¶15. (U) The Embassy has no AmCits registered as residing in Bukhara. One AmCit who was part of a tour group in Bukhara called the Embassy asking about the explosions. The AmCit reported that her tour was not interrupted and was continuing as normal. The Embassy's Consular Section issued a Warden message reporting the explosions and recommending that AmCits temporarily avoid travel to the Bukhara region.

AMBASSADOR OFFERS ASSISTANCE

¶16. (C) The Ambassador called MFA America's Division Chief Mamadjanov and asked whether the government wanted Explosive Ordinance Disposal expertise or medical assistance to address the situation in Kagan. Mamadjanov said he would inform the Foreign Minister and let the Embassy know if any U.S. assistance was desired. During a previously scheduled morning meeting at the MFA, the Ambassador also shared his

condolences with First Deputy Foreign Minister Ilkhomjon Nematov.

¶17. (C) The Defense Attache Office (DAO) also offered the MOD emergency supplies and medical assistance. The MOD said they would respond if any assistance was needed.

UZBEK RUMOR MILL IN FULL FORCE

¶18. (C) Despite limited Uzbek media coverage, the lack of reliable information so far about the explosions appears to have fueled the rumor mill in Bukhara. Poloff spoke to a contact whose family members in Bukhara reportedly told him that as many as 1,300 people were killed in Kagan and "everything has been flattened." The family member further reported that authorities are driving around Bukhara announcing through megaphones that there could be another major explosion this evening and that everyone should leave the city, either west towards the town of Jondor, north towards Gijdyvan, or east towards Navoi. The family members also reported that authorities were not arranging transport and people were frantically trying to assemble provisions and leave the city themselves. According to the family, the possible explosion could effect "a 50 kilometer radius."

¶19. (C) The Public Affairs alumnus and iEARN coordinator later in the day reported rumors that as many as 5,000 individuals were killed and 20,000 individuals had been evacuated to Bukhara schools and colleges. He further reported that authorities were telling people in Bukhara to evacuate to rural areas outside of the city for the next two days because of fears of additional explosions.

¶20. (C) The independent Uzmtronom.com website reported that "sources close to the MOD" did not rule out that the explosions were an act of sabotage to discredit Defense Minister Ruslan Mirzaev and expedite his removal. According to the website's editor Sergei Yezhkov (who is well-known for publishing damaging articles on government officials that we suspect are fed to him by interested parties), the sources reported that Mirzaev had been fighting corruption among officers," who were reportedly profiting from the illegal sale of army supplies (Comment: We believe Yezhkov's article is pure speculation, and we have so far seen no evidence to suggest that the explosions at Kagan were caused by anything other than an accident. End comment.)

COMMENT

¶21. (C) We are so far in no position to confirm or deny these reports, but we suspect the lack of concrete information in the local press has fueled the spread of worst-case scenario rumors. However, we also suspect that the number of casualties and damage in Kagan is greater than what the government has been reporting so far. We will continue to follow the situation closely and provide updates as needed. Meanwhile, the Embassy's Emergency Action Committee was convened and appropriate steps were taken to protect AmCits and engage in rumor control as outlined above.

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